

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 097 738

CS 500 800

AUTHOR Lynn, Elizabeth Meagher
TITLE Philosophical Assumptions About the Nature of Reality
in "The New Rhetoric."
PUB DATE Dec 73
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
Speech Communication Association (Chicago, Illinois,
December 1973)
EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.75 HC-\$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Audiences; *Authors; *Communication (Thought
Transfer); Higher Education; *Philosophy; Rhetoric;
*Rhetorical Criticism; Theories
IDENTIFIERS *New Rhetoric; Olbrechts Tyteca (L): Perelman
(Chaim); Reality

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to extract and summarize the truth-, fact-, and reality-bases of Chaim Perelman's and Mme. L. Olbrechts-Tyteca's "The New Rhetoric." This paper considers: the four basic factors which the theorist needs to take into account when interpreting "The New Rhetoric"; the descriptive characteristics of the universal audience found scattered throughout "The New Rhetoric" which serve as a key to the authors' conceptions of the reality shared by a speaker and his universal audience; and the way in which the foregoing relate to the authors' direct statements about the nature of reality. (RB)

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by Elizabeth Meagher Lynn

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Unpublished Paper Presented at the 1973 Annual Convention of
The Speech Communication Association
Chicago, Illinois
December, 1973

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by Elizabeth Meagher Lynn

Underlying the work of all rhetorical theorists is a set of philosophical assumptions regarding the nature of fact, truth, and reality. These assumptions, in turn, determine how the theorist will attempt to explain the perceptual foundations for man's rhetorical actions. If a theorist believes, for instance, that fact, truth, and reality are a matter of individual perception--thus varying in essence from one man's perception to another's--his view of the rhetorical act will be markedly different from the theorist who assumes that fact, truth, and reality are not only knowable but perceptually unitary in nature. Hypothetically, in the latter's philosophical view, facts could be considered definite and not open to interpretation; reality could be believed to be experienced similarly by all; and truth could be accepted as constant and unchanging.

The classical notion of truth, which still claims adherents, stems from a concurrence between Plato's and Aristotle's teachings 1) that truth is constant and knowable, and 2) that truth is discoverable through a dialectic process (Plato),¹ or through a rhetorical process "in order that no part of the case may escape." (Aristotle)² As time has passed, new philosophical theories of truth have evolved to coincide with the accumulation of knowledge and with the changing realities of the world; and related philosophical assumptions, which have served as the underpinnings for all rhetorical theory, have emerged from the same evolutionary crucible, refined by the same flames.

As a consequence of this fundamental relationship between rhetorical theory and philosophical assumptions, it would appear reasonable to hypothesize

that significant modifications in rhetorical theory might well serve as indicators of corresponding changes in underlying philosophical assumptions. Within recent years, a significant modification in rhetorical theory has been announced by Chaim Perelman and Mme. L. Olbrechts-Tyteca through their "new" rhetoric. In order to assist subsequent analysis and to gain a fuller appreciation of the possible ramifications of this "new" rhetoric, this paper will attempt to extract and summarize the truth-, fact-, and reality-bases of Perelman's and Olbrechts-Tyteca's The New Rhetoric.³

The key to comprehending Perelman's truth-fact-reality assumptions appears to rest with his concept of universal audience. Truth, fact, and reality, he asserts, will vary according to what the universal audience regards as real, true, and objectively valid.⁴ To determine Perelman's philosophical premises, then, it would seem necessary to examine not only his direct statements about the nature of reality, but also to consider his ideas about the reality perceptions connecting a speaker and his universal audience. In the following order, then, this paper will consider: 1) four basic factors which the theorist needs to take into account when interpreting The New Rhetoric; 2) descriptive characteristics of the universal audience found scattered throughout The New Rhetoric which serve as a key to Perelman's conceptions of the reality shared by a speaker and his universal audience; and finally, 3) the way in which the foregoing relates to Perelman's direct statements about the nature of reality.

As a starting point, Perelman's basic concept of "audience" extends far beyond the traditional notions of oratory to also include intrapersonal as well as interpersonal communication, oral and written communication, and mass media.⁵ However, it is his extension of the "audience" concept to a

"universal audience" which has aroused the greatest curiosity and controversy. Two assumptions--1) that it is impossible for speakers to retain moral integrity when adapting their convictions to particular audiences, and 2) that real, particular audiences are too incompetent to recognize truth--establish the foundation for Perelman's concept of the universal audience, which he defines simply as "the whole of mankind, or at least, of all normal, adult persons."⁶ These assumptions appear to be basic premises for the theoretical construct which Perelman develops.

Secondly, a problem in understanding Perelman's treatment of the universal audience is that he or his translators alternately refer to "the universal audience" and then to "a universal audience." The problem may simply be a matter of translator sensitivity to semantic usage, since in the French language, the distinction between the "un(e)" and "le/la" articles differs from the English usage of "a" and "the." Nonetheless, in The New Rhetoric, frequent use of "the" as a qualifier for "universal audience" undoubtedly has contributed to attracting criticisms, since the use of "the" implies to the English-speaking reader that there is a single universal audience which sets the standard for all speakers and speaking situations. On the contrary, the concept of universal audience appears to be a highly individual matter (as will be discussed subsequently); and, while it might be accurate to use "the" when speaking of Perelman's concept of "the universal audience," it would seem linguistically inaccurate to speak of "the universal audience" in relationship to speakers in general, as if there were one single judgmental group for all mankind.

A third factor the reader needs to recognize is that Perelman's legal background strongly influences his rhetorical perceptions in three primary ways:

1) how he views the communication situation; 2) how he sees the relationship between a speaker and his universal audience; and 3) the basic assumptions he has regarding the nature of truth. As mentioned above, Perelman's concept of "audience" may extend beyond traditional limitations but, at the same time, his legal background imposes perceptual constraints on the interactions he assumes occur between a speaker and his audience. Although The New Rhetoric is wholly devoid of examples which might illustrate or clarify his points, Perelman's theory appears to deal solely with the forensic interaction which might occur between a defendant (or defense attorney) and a jury, or with the tactics which would be used by a man needing to justify his actions to others.

In addition, the lawyer's perspective is evident in Perelman's discussion of the speaker's options in admitting or rejecting potential members of a universal audience. Perelman states that a speaker will identify his universal audience for a specific subject by selecting those "rational beings" who agree with him on the premises for his argument. While he argues that it may be the purpose of a speaker "to gain the adherence of every rational being,"⁷ Perelman also recognizes the fact that men tend to dismiss as irrational those persons who disagree with them:

Every person believes in a set of facts, of truths, which he thinks must be accepted by every "normal" person, because they are valid for every rational being.⁸ [emphasis mine]

.....

[However,] If argumentation addressed to the universal audience and calculated to convince does not convince everybody, one can always resort to disqualifying the recalcitrant by classifying him as stupid or abnormal.⁹ [emphasis Perelman's]

Since Perelman does not subsequently specify the existence of a set of facts or truths which "are valid for every rational being," there is no indication that he believes such a universal standard actually exists. A more accurate interpretation of Perelman's words might be that he believes that each person assumes a certain set of facts or truths should be valid for all mankind. As a speaker identifies people who either disagree with his assumptions or their universal application to all mankind, the speaker has the right--since "the agreement of a universal audience is thus a matter. . . of right"¹⁰--to disqualify those persons whom he views as recalcitrants or dissidents. In essence, this concept of a speaker's right to exclude dissidents from his conceptual universal audience is closely related to the legal voir dire, the lawyer's preliminary examination of a prospective juror or witness to ascertain competence to hear a case or give testimony. The voir dire provides a screening process to eliminate incompetent or otherwise unqualified persons from serving as jurors. If Perelman, in fact, conceives a universal audience as being formed in somewhat the same way as a jury--by observing the same procedures or standards--the question arises (but is unanswered) as to the extent to which the speaker may exercise the same assumptions, techniques, and prerogatives as an examining lawyer in determining who will compose his universal audience.

A final way in which Perelman's legal background influences his rhetorical perceptions is that he views "truth" as a judge would in a courtroom. He rejects the Cartesian position that whenever two men come to opposite decisions about the same matter one of them at least must certainly be in the wrong. While admitting that such a view may be applicable in mathematical or calculable matters, he argues that the idea of unicity of truth does not apply to rhetoric or dialectic since the latter concern only what cannot be decided by calculation, measuring, or weighing.¹¹ Thus, Perelman assumes the position that truth may

well be contradictory. The basis for this position, he explains, lies in the juridical tradition of the Talmud, in which "opposed positions can be equally reasonable; one of them does not have to be right."¹²

In sum, Perelman's legal background strongly influences his perceptions of rhetoric. He views the communication situation as, basically, the interaction between a defendant-speaker and a jury-audience; his conception of a universal audience seems closely related to a lawyer's idea of an "ideal" jury; and his concept of "truth" is so broad as to include the possibility of contradiction.

The third, and final, factor which the theorist must take into consideration when reading The New Rhetoric is that, while Perelman makes numerous distinctions between particular and universal audiences (e.g., a speaker might prepare different arguments for a universal audience than he might for a particular one), these distinctions apply only to the speaker's perception of his audience(s). Perelman assumes that the speaker simultaneously conceives two audiences--a particular audience and a universal audience--and thus, must take each of the two audiences into consideration when planning his content and lines of argument. For example, Perelman indicates that the "objects of agreement" will differ between a speaker and his particular audience and that same speaker and his universal audience. Those objects of agreement which comprise the "real" (facts, truths, and presumptions) "are assumed to command the agreement of the universal audience"; but those objects of agreement constituting the "preferable" (values, hierarchies and loci) "only command the agreement of particular audiences."¹³ Thus, according to this breakdown, Perelman is maintaining that a speaker and his particular audience need not agree upon what is "real"; but he is asserting at the same time that it is mandatory for a speaker and his universal audience to agree upon what is "real."

These particular audience/universal audience distinctions vanish when a speaker's audiences are perceived by an observer, or critic. According to Perelman, "each speaker's universal audience can, indeed, from an external viewpoint be regarded as a particular audience."¹⁴ To the observer, then, a speaker might be seen as addressing two particular audiences: particular audience₁ (in the speaker's physical presence) and particular audience₂ (what the speaker conceives of as his universal audience).

While it appears valid to distinguish between a speaker's perception of his audiences and an observer's perception, Perelman has not clearly established if his remarks about particular audiences apply equally to the speaker's perception of his particular audience and to the observer's perceptions of two particular audiences. Until this point is clarified, it would seem that, in Perelman's eyes, the critic might not be in a position to judge the facts, truths, or presumptions of a speaker, since this is a matter of agreement between the speaker and his universal audience and since the critic might not be able to conceive the speaker's universal audience with any degree of accuracy.

To summarize, then, the theorist reading The New Rhetoric needs to consider: 1) Perelman's negative attitudes about adjusting ideas to an audience; 2) the semantic difficulty posed by prefacing "universal audience" with the article "the"; 3) the unique perspective which Perelman maintains throughout this book as a consequence of his legal background; and 4) the possibility of inconsistencies in Perelman's distinctions between particular and universal audiences.

With these factors as givens, then, it is possible to return to Perelman's point that reality (facts, truths, and presumptions) varies according to the universal audience. Since his assumptions about the nature of reality seem so

interwoven with his idea of the universal audience, a better understanding of Perelman's concept of reality may come through a consideration of the characteristics of the universal audience.

To begin with, a thorough reading of The New Rhetoric makes it clear that, despite Perelman's own definition of universal audience, "all normal adult persons"¹⁵ do not collectively constitute an enduring, constant, universal audience. Rather, they make up a pool from which speakers (or message-senders of all kinds) may selectively draw universal audience members. Perelman does not suggest, however, that speakers mentally address this entire pool of humanity. On the contrary, as he discusses audience considerations, he emphasizes that the "set" of those a speaker wishes to address "falls far short of all human beings."¹⁶ He further describes a universal audience as a mental construction of a speaker, composed of "those whom the speaker wishes to influence by his argumentation."¹⁷ Since every speaker "constitutes his universal audience from what he knows of his fellow men" in order "to transcend the few oppositions he is aware of"; and, since all men are restricted by the human perceptual processes to a relatively limited understanding of their fellow creatures and their differing points of view, Perelman logically concludes that: "Each individual, each culture has thus its own conception of the universal audience."¹⁸

Essentially, Perelman's universal audience is what he calls an "effective community of minds," and he has identified a whole set of conditions which must be met before such a community is conceivable. There must be a common language (which significantly reduces the "all-ness" contained in his definitions of "every rational being" and "all normal adult persons").¹⁹ There must be a common observance of social norms regulating the exchange of communication.²⁰ The

speaker must desire to address the members of his universal audience and must value the opportunity to gain their mental cooperation and adherence.²¹ As broad as these limitations are, they make it clear that Perelman's universal audience concept does not include "all" of humanity.

On the other hand, the universal audience seems only as confined in time and space as the speaker wishes. Perelman makes it clear that speakers do not have to limit their universal audiences to persons within physical, or even geographical proximity.²² Furthermore, the absence of a proximity requirement and Perelman's repeated references to the timelessness of arguments addressed to a universal audience, suggest that a universal audience might transcend time limitations.²³

Lack of time and space restrictions, and an emphasis on the speaker's valuation of the universal audience, however, are not meant to imply that such conditions set the framework for an elite universal audience. Perelman emphasizes that the elite audience--traditionally conceived as the speaker's criterion since it was "endowed with exceptional and infallible means of knowledge"²⁴--must not be equated with the universal audience. According to Perelman, the elite audience "embodies the universal audience only for those who acknowledge this role of vanguard and model. For the rest it will be no more than a particular audience. The status of an audience varies with the concepts one has of it."²⁵

Those not-necessarily-elite beings who meet a speaker's criteria for "an effective community of minds" go through a further elimination procedure. They must agree with the speaker as to what is real. The speaker, as conceiver/author of a universal audience, has ultimate authority and considerable selective powers in admitting, or refusing to admit "rational beings" to his universal audience. As has been mentioned previously, a speaker has the right to disqualify persons as "not-normal" who disagree with his set of facts, truths,

and presumptions. Since individual speakers conceive reality according to their own particular philosophical view, Perelman explains that what is considered real in argumentation "is characterized by a claim to validity vis-a-vis the universal audience."²⁶ In other words, a speaker develops certainty about what is real as it is agreed to by his universal audience.

In sum, each speaker addresses himself to a universal audience which is selected to coincide with the speaker's own view of reality. At the same time, "interaction" between the speaker and his universal audience confirms the speaker's view of reality. Since the resulting universal audience is both a reflection of the speaker's view of reality and the means by which the speaker subsequently validates his view of reality, Perelman seems to be saying that speakers (will? should?) only address themselves to a reality-standard existing within themselves. In essence, Perelman seems to imply that reality--facts, truths, and presumptions--exists within the mind of the speaker and, consequently, that reality will differ from one speaker to another. The conclusion thus may be drawn that Perelman is operating from the premise that truth is a matter of subjective reality.

This conclusion appears to be supported by 1) the differences expressed in The New Rhetoric distinguishing Perelman's theory and Platonic theory, and 2) Perelman's specific statements about the nature of facts, truths, and presumptions between a speaker and his universal audience.

In the early pages of The New Rhetoric, Perelman's thinking seems to reflect considerable Platonic influence. He concurs with Plato that rhetoric deteriorates when it is adapted wholly to the interests of "the mob"; and he expresses his bias against rhetorical theory which stresses that--in argumentation--"the important thing is not knowing what the speaker regards as true or important, but knowing the views of those he is addressing."²⁷

In addition, he clearly accepts the Platonic dichotomy between reality and appearance. In his discussion of reality in The New Rhetoric, Perelman's initial distinction between appearance and reality suggests a close relationship to Platonic thought: ". . . while appearance may correspond to and merge with reality, it may also lead us into error concerning it."²⁸ Like Plato, Perelman recommends that we avoid such error by using a mental construction of reality as "a criterion, a norm which allows us to distinguish those aspects of [appearance] which are of value [non-deceptive] from those which are not [deceptive]."²⁹ To the extent that aspects of appearance do not correspond to this rule of reality-construction, Perelman (like Plato) calls these aspects "illusory, erroneous, or apparent (in the depreciatory sense of this word)."³⁰

At this point, however, the parallel ends between Perelman's notion of reality and that of Plato. Perelman utterly rejects Plato's notion of an objective reality which is constant and knowable. He severs himself from Plato with the flat statement: ". . . the existence of this objective reality [assumed by the ancient writers] . . . is not proved."³¹

As Perelman explains it, a mental reality-construct provides a standard that "can only be potential."³² Application of the standard does not produce clear-cut reality-appearance distinctions. Moreover, Perelman continues, since reality is a mental construct, "knowledge of it is indirect, sometimes even impossible, and rarely capable of communication in an exhaustive and unquestionable manner."³³ While Perelman acknowledges the limitations of his reality-construct theory, he rejects the contemporary philosophical theories which argue that appearances are reality, on the grounds that these theories do not account for the incompatibility of appearances.³⁴

The solution which Perelman offers to the appearance vs. reality question

is a system of philosophical pairs, of which appearance
reality is one of the pairs, an inseparable unit in a constant ratio-relationship. The way in which the terms relate depends on the situation. Perelman explains, for instance, how this relationship may vary in a single argumentation situation:

. . . what one person terms appearance is generally what was reality to someone else, or was confused with reality. . . . Sometimes the argument seems to concern the object under discussion, sometimes the idea that particular persons formed of the object, and sometimes the status that particular persons accorded . . . it for the purpose of argument. These different planes are intermingled, supporting one another.³⁵

In order for an argument to deal with reality, therefore, "the person who . . . argues, is supposed to know the criteria of reality that his audience will apply and to act accordingly."³⁶ Since Perelman's theory assumes that a speaker and his universal audience will share the same criteria for reality, it follows that a speaker and his universal audience will view the appearance
reality ratio-relationship in a similar manner.

This paper's conclusion that Perelman's theory is based on a philosophy of subjective reality is further supported by his statements regarding facts, truths, and presumptions--the composite elements of reality. According to Perelman, the existence of facts, truths,³⁷ and presumptions is confirmed through validation by the universal audience.

Facts, for Perelman, are objects of precise limited agreement which are determined by the adherence and agreement of the universal audience.³⁸ Within Perelman's system, information accepted as fact by one universal audience may not be considered fact by another. Thus, Perelman considers facts to be neither

constant nor certain, in and of themselves. Moreover, the status of fact is retained only as long as there is (universal?) audience acceptance, support, and adherence.³⁹

Perelman refers to truths as "more complex systems [than facts] relating to connection between facts."⁴⁰ Truths are affected by the universal audience in the same way that facts are.⁴¹ Thus, just as the speaker's notion of reality is reflected in and validated by his universal audience, the speaker's conception of facts and truths will similarly be reflected in and validated by his universal audience. By rejecting those humans from his universal audience who would dispute his facts or truths as "not-normal," a speaker ensures himself of an audience who will agree with his perception of reality.

In discussing presumptions (that which a speaker and his audience take for granted), Perelman explains that there is an interdependent relationship between 1) presumptions, 2) a universal audience, and 3) the speaker's concept of what is "normal and likely." The "normal"--as conceived by the speaker--serves as the foundation for his reasoning and depends upon a reference group which, Perelman admits, is often a social group.⁴² What the speaker perceives as normal or likely must be similarly perceived by his universal audience, and this sharing of perceptions forms the basis for their common presumptions.⁴³ Thus, Perelman indirectly introduces one more characteristic of the universal audience: members of a universal audience, in order to agree upon presumptions with a speaker, will be members of the same reference group. Once agreement has been reached between a speaker and his universal audience regarding presumptions of the normal, "presumed facts are treated as equivalent to observed facts and can serve, with equal authority, as a premise for argument."⁴⁴ If a speaker and members of his universal audience cannot agree on what is "normal and likely,"

there will be no basis for argument.

To summarize, the basis for Perelman's philosophical assumptions rests with his chameleon-concept of universal audience. The universal audience may take as many forms as reasonable man can conceive, and each form inherently will possess its own set of criteria for determining truth. At any given moment, a speaker's universal audience will be constructed from rational beings who:

- 1) speak his native language; 2) observe and share the speaker's norms governing communication exchanges; 3) are valued as intellectual colleagues by the speaker; 4) need not be physically proximate to the speaker or to each other; 5) may transcend time; 6) need not compose an elite audience; 7) share the speaker's philosophical view in determining the validity of facts, truths, and presumptions (reality); 8) share the speaker's view of the ratio-relationship between a given reality and appearance; and 9) are members of one or more of the speaker's reference groups.

Perelman views the universal audience as the criterion for each individual speaker but, at the same time, he argues that agreement of the universal audience is a speaker's right. Since each speaker has the right to exclude those dissidents from his universal audience who disagree with his notion of reality and normality, it follows that a universal audience is conceived in terms of a speaker's individual perception of reality. In essence, then, the universal audience both reflects and validates the speaker's concept of reality. Finally, since Perelman recognizes that each speaker may have a different philosophical view, he allows for the fact that reality will differ according to each speaker and each speaking situation. Thus, Perelman assumes that reality has no objective existence, but is dependent upon individual perception.

Although Perelman insists upon preliminary agreement of a speaker and his universal audience regarding reality, he recognizes the problems of accurately communicating about a subjective reality. Perelman explains that once a speaker has begun to communicate his reality to others, there is no guarantee that the reality he expresses is one which his universal audience will recognize. As soon as the speaker begins to talk, the reality in his mind is modified both by his modality of expression⁴⁵ and by the lines of argument he uses.⁴⁶ Perelman concludes: ". . . in discourse considered as reality, the meaning attributed to the connection of the argument, to what justified the 'therefore,' will vary according to what the speaker says, and also according to the hearer's opinion on the subject."⁴⁷ Reality, then, according to Perelman, is only what each of us make of it. Its subjective existence is threatened by distortion each time a speaker attempts to communicate his reality to others.

Surely there will be many who will argue against such an ephemeral concept of reality. Yet, these fact-truth-presumption assumptions which Perelman makes are a significant new effort in rhetorical theory to bridge the gaps between ancient Platonic idealism, judicial practice, and twentieth-century social science concepts of reality. Perelman has drawn from Plato a respect for seeking truth: the concept of a universal audience attempts to impose on each speaker the highest standards for truth he is capable of achieving. On the other hand, Perelman's thinking clearly reflects contemporary trends in the social sciences: differences in individual cognitive systems, differences in background/environment/culture, and differences across time account for and justify different speaker perceptions of facts, truths, and presumptions. Finally, Perelman's legal background allows him to incorporate into rhetorical

theory the concept that truth may be relative and even contradictory. Perelman's claim to producing a "new rhetoric" may be open to dispute in other respects, but it would appear that in his philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality, he has applied to rhetoric a combination of twentieth-century science and age-old philosophy to produce some of the most provocative thinking of the decade.

FOOTNOTES

¹Plato, "The Method of Dialectic," Phaedrus, trans. and comm. R. Hackforth (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1952), pp. 131-137, 264 E - 266 B.

²Aristotle, The Rhetoric, trans. Lane Cooper (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1932), 1.1.

³Chaim Perelman and Mme. L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation, trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969). In the interests of simplicity--not sexism--these co-authors hereafter will be referred to as "Perelman."

⁴Ibid., p. 33.

⁵Ibid., pp. 6-7.

⁶Ibid., pp. 20-21, 23, 25, 30.

⁷Ibid., p. 28.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 31.

¹¹Chaim Perelman, "The New Rhetoric: A Theory of Practical Reasoning," trans. E. Griffin-Collart and O. Bird, Great Ideas Today--1970 (Great Books of the Western World), pp. 284-285.

¹²Ibid., p. 284.

¹³Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, The New Rhetoric, p. 179.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 28, 30.

²⁰Ibid., p. 15.

²¹Ibid., pp. 14-16.

²²Ibid., pp. 19, 20, 26, 491.

²³Ibid., pp. 7, 19, 26, 32, 491.

²⁴Ibid., p. 33.

²⁵Ibid., p. 34.

²⁶Ibid., p. 66.

²⁷Ibid., pp. 23-24.

²⁸Ibid., p. 416.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid., p. 452.

³²Ibid., p. 417.

³³Ibid., p. 418.

³⁴Ibid., pp. 418-419.

³⁵Ibid., p. 424.

³⁶Ibid., p. 458.

³⁷Perelman elects to discuss "truths," rather than "truth."

³⁸Ibid., pp. 68-69.

³⁹Ibid., pp. 67-68.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 69.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 68.

⁴²Ibid., p. 72.

⁴³Ibid., pp. 71-72.

⁴⁴Ibid., pp. 73-74.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 154.

⁴⁶Ibid., pp. 262-263.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 263.